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U.S. Is Offering Kuwait's Ships A Naval Shield

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WASHINGTON, March 23 — The United States has offered to extend military protection to Kuwaiti-owned vessels traveling through the Persian Gulf to meet possible threats from Iran, Administration officials said today.

The protection, which the officials said was requested by Kuwait about a month ago, could include escorts for ships as they enter and leave Kuwaiti oil terminals and as they pass through the Strait of Hormuz. This is the first time any of the Gulf countries has specifically asked for American military escorts and, if such escorts are provided, it would represent an escalation of American military activity in the region.

A Diplomatic Step

Kuwait, however, was reported to have asked for both American and Soviet naval escorts. The American desire to be the only protecting force might lead the Kuwaitis to decline the offer, as they have turned down American protection in the past. But American officials today said they expected Kuwait to accept the American plan.

Beyond the offer of military protection, the American move was seen as an important diplomatic step, reinforcing its position with the pro-Western Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. Since the revelations last November of secret American sales of military equipment to Iran, several Arab countries have raised questions about American intentions in the region.

One State Department official said that if Kuwait goes through with the arrangement, it would send a significant "signal" to other Arab countries. In the past, Kuwait has been reluctant to accept American military protection, perhaps because of its large Palestinian and Shiite population.

In 1980, when the United States provided AWACS reconnaissance planes to Saudi Arabia, it offered the same protection to Kuwait, but the Kuwaitis turned down the offer.

According to the Administration officials, Kuwait asked for protection of its vessels following an increase in attacks on shipping in the Gulf. At about that time, American intelligence agencies learned that Iran had installed new anti-ship missiles near the Strait of Hormuz, which leads out of the Gulf to the Arabian Sea.

Soviet Role Was Sought

At first, Kuwait wanted the job of escorting its ships shared by the United States and the Soviet Union. But the United States, which has tried to limit Soviet influence in the region, said it would protect all the Kuwaiti ships that carry oil in the Gulf, Administration officials said.

Kuwait is arranging for some Soviet

tankers to carry oil from its ports, and these probably will be escorted by Soviet naval vessels. But, under the proposal put forth by the Americans, the Soviet Union would not be providing direct protection to Arab nations.

"Our response was prompt and offered to protect all of their ships," one American official said of the Kuwaitis. "They have since been working at taking yes for an answer."

The American officials said Kuwait was informed last week that the United States would extend its protection to about a dozen ships, most of them oil tankers, that regularly operate in the region. The ships fly the flags of other nations, but have been attacked several times in the last year by Iranian aircraft.

Details Aren't Worked Out

Details of how the United States Navy would protect Kuwaiti ships have not been worked out, the officials said. The protective cover would not begin until Kuwait formally accepts the American offer, they said.

Adm. William J. Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, met with officials in Kuwait last week to discuss how shipping might be protected.

The United States has about six frigates and destroyers in the Persian Gulf, and the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk is stationed with her battle group in the northern Arabian Sea, within easy range of the Strait of Hormuz.

Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger said Sunday that American naval forces are in the region "to do what is necessary to keep shipping going in a free and unfettered manner, free from attack."

On Friday, the Administration formally warned Iran against any interference with shipping in the region.

On Sunday, the Iranian Government said in broadcasts on its Teheran radio station that it did not intend to threaten shipping in the region, and warned that the United States should not intervene.